

THE CHANGING FACE OF HOMELESSNESS

With last December's release of the U.S. Conference of Mayors report on the Annual Hunger and Homelessness Survey, I took note of the fact that the face of homelessness had changed significantly in recent years to include women and children who are escaping a violent home life. With Domestic Violence Awareness Month just days away, it seemed appropriate to share that information now.

With an estimated 1% of the population of the United States experiencing homelessness each year, we are all too familiar with those who are mentally ill, runaways, migrant workers, drug and alcohol abusers, veterans and the chronically homeless. But what we may not be so aware of is that victims of domestic violence or intimate partner violence (IPV), which include families with children, are another subpopulation of the homeless.

Many women who are fleeing abusive situations do not identify with the common perception of homelessness, and thus decline to utilize services at homeless shelters. This stems from an overall public perception of homelessness as primarily affecting men. Until recently, older, single, white males represented everyone's idea of a homeless person. This stereotype still thrives today, although the truth has changed drastically. What cannot

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be denied is that homeless populations now include families with children and women. In fact, it has been estimated that one third of homeless adults are women.

IPV refers to the physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse that takes place in the context of an intimate relationship and is one of the most common forms of gender-based violence, characterized by long-term patterns of abusive behavior and control. These behaviors and methods of control – isolation, barriers to economic security, fear, intimidation, coercion, and humiliation – create an atmosphere of helplessness for those who find themselves in an abusive relationship and stay out of fear for their physical safety and/or economic dependency – nearly 50%. Victims of IPV are often cut-off from support networks and economic resources by their abusers. As a result, they may lack steady income and poor employment, credit, and rental histories.

In a national survey conducted by the Interagency Council on the Homeless, IPV was the second most stated cause of homelessness for families, with one in eight reporting that they had left their home because of abuse or violence. Another study showed that one in four homeless women is homeless because of her experience with violence.

This information is substantiated closer to home. A Point-in-Time survey of Louisville homeless shelters conducted by the Coalition for the Homeless in January 2007 found that 28% of those surveyed indicated “family arguments or domestic violence” as the reason for becoming homeless. This represents more than an 11% increase over the previous year’s data. Furthermore, information gleaned from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) database indicated that more than one third of clients with children reported being victims of domestic violence.

For these victims, leaving an abusive relationship often means leaving their home and family income behind. In addition, being unable to find or maintain permanent housing frequently causes victims to return to their abuser. Studies have shown that victims leave an average of seven times before finally being able to leave for good – thus potentially experiencing multiple episodes of homelessness before reaching self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, of victims of IPV, the rate of victimization of women separated from their partners is about three times higher than those of divorced women and about 25 times higher than those who are married. Other research has shown that although separated and divorced women make up only 10% of all women in the U.S., they account for 75% of all battered women.

Women at all socio-economic levels experience IPV, but poor women experience it at higher rates than those coming from households with higher incomes. The Department of Justice once reported that women with household incomes of less than \$7,500 are seven times more likely to experience domestic violence than women with household incomes over \$75,000. Seventeen percent of females in Jefferson County live below the poverty level.

Women continue to be overrepresented among the poor – nearly two out of three of all poor adults - according to census data, with females being head-of-household in more than half of all poor families. A 2005 report indicated that 79% of households receiving federal housing assistance are headed by women. With housing costs consuming more and more of a family's income, increasingly more people are facing the risk of homelessness. A health crisis, missed paycheck or other unexpected expense can send any of our community's poor over the edge.

Currently, victims of IPV do not fit the definition of chronically homeless and therefore, cannot be served through many of the federally funded housing programs. A lack of affordable housing, both nationally and

locally, can significantly reduce alternatives for women experiencing IPV, locking them in abusive situations or forcing them and their children into homelessness if they leave. It shouldn't be a choice between staying with their abuser and sleeping on the streets.

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